Reprint of: Connecting, belonging: Volunteering, wellbeing and leadership among refugee youth

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The paper argues that volunteering has proven a critical source of wellbeing, belonging and leadership for refugee background youth in Canterbury, New Zealand, following the earthquakes of 2010-2011. In support of this claim, the paper considers the voluntary participation of refugee youth in two post-earthquake youth-created and -driven initiatives. The first initiative is the Student Volunteer Army, which mobilised thousands of volunteers to assist residents with the immediate-post-disaster clean-up following each of the major earthquakes in Canterbury. The Summerz End Youth Fest, which in April 2014 brought young people together for a day of celebration and fun, constitutes the second initiative.

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1. Introduction

This article interrogates the benefits which volunteering in a post-disaster context have provided to individuals traditionally marginalised from mainstream society by virtue of their ethnicity and age: refugee background youth. It argues that the voluntary efforts of such youth have, on the one hand, had positive impacts on their wellbeing and sense of belonging, and, on the other hand, resulted in the development of key leadership skills. It further argues that the notions of wellbeing, belonging and leadership as they pertain to this group are self-reinforcing.

This argument is based on four interrelated premises. The article firstly contends that in disrupting norms, disasters can provide the impetus and space for individuals to become leaders, including individuals traditionally positioned outside systems of leadership. The second premise states that the ability to exercise agency in both the immediate-post-disaster and recovery phases helps individuals and communities come to terms with disaster [54], which increases people's sense of control in the face of a disempowering event and thus serves to improve their wellbeing. The third premise is that volunteering benefits wellbeing through strengthening participants' sense of self and confidence [16,26]. Finally, for individuals marginalised by social, economic and political structures such as refugee youth, possessing agency and the ability to contribute to society is critical to their sense of belonging [13,66].

In support of its central claim that volunteering has provided refugee youth with a source of leadership, belonging and wellbeing, this article considers the voluntary participation of refugee youth in two youth-created and -driven initiatives after the devastating earthquakes of 2010–2011 in Canterbury, New Zealand. The first initiative is the Student Volunteer Army (SVA), which mobilised thousands of volunteers to assist residents with the immediate-post-disaster clean-up following each of the major earthquakes. The Summerz End Youth Fest, which in April 2014 brought young people together for a day of celebration and fun, constitutes the second initiative.

In arguing that volunteering has proven a critical source of wellbeing and leadership for refugee youth in Canterbury, this article also seeks to bring their story to light. Despite the dedication and energy of these youth in the post-disaster response and recovery phases, they have remained largely invisible from Canterbury's disaster account. As has been noted [45], certain stories of the earthquakes have come to the fore whilst others have been lost. The voluntary efforts of young refugees fall into this latter category, and this article seeks to redress this omission.

2. Literature

Volunteering has been extensively researched, with particular attention focussed on its potential to benefit both society and the individual volunteer. It has been recognised that volunteering can stimulate civic consciousness, which can then lead to social integration and cohesion [58]. The connectivity and engagement fostered through volunteering (and 'participation' more broadly) are believed to support social, economic and political norms and

systems, including democracy [63]. In addition to benefitting the community, the act of volunteering is also assumed to benefit the volunteer. For young people in particular, volunteering offers an opportunity to participate in decisions and processes from which they are often traditionally excluded [16,17,64]. Three key arguments underpin the rationale to include young people in such processes: the right of young people to voice their opinions; the improvement of services through youth consultation; and the developmental benefits stimulated by social inclusion [29].

Participation in society can thus be conceived of as enforcing responsible citizenship behaviour, and vice versa. Yet the links between participation and citizenship come with some warnings. Research has demonstrated that interpretations of 'citizenship' differ; for example [32], interviews show that New Zealanders consider family and community far more relevant than citizenship; and also that 'good' citizenship is seen to involve day-to-day interaction at the local level rather than participation in formal systems. Talking with children in New Zealand [64], noted that understandings of citizenship were tied to social relationships and local contexts.

Other findings highlight that officialised or normalised understandings of 'participation' need not hold true at the individual or community level. Speaking with students deemed 'non-participatory' by their teachers, Hartas[34] determined that the students' non-participation stemmed primarily from the perceived irrelevance of traditional forms of participation to their lives and aspirations. There has been significant concern among adults that young people are disconnected from traditional centres of engagement [29]; however, researchers have shown that significant numbers of youth do in fact participate in activities which unite them with people and systems - but they undertake these actions informally and on their own terms [27,29]. Whatever form social participation may take, scholars have pointed out the personal benefits which this activity can engender. Primary among these benefits is improved wellbeing resulting from connectivity with others and the development of skills and confidence.

Central to conceptualisations of belonging is identity. Young people's ethnic identities have long been of interest to scholars, because as a period of increased reflection and understanding of the significance of group membership – as well as a time when young people question their types and levels of civic engagement [36] – adolescence is viewed as a critical age for the development of ethnic identity [53,59]. Ethnic identity knowledge is linked to wellbeing: Eyou et al. [18] found that ethnic adolescents who identify strongly with both their home and host cultures possessed the most robust psychological wellbeing, while other researchers have demonstrated that young people who are comfortable with their ethnic identities are likely to have high levels of self-confidence and wellbeing [41].

The discussion of identity as pertaining to ethnic youth needs to be further investigated in the case of refugee youth, whose experiences of identity are likely to differ from the experiences of young people who have moved countries as migrants. The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as any person who

> owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it [64].

The elements of flight and fear render the experiences of

refugees different to those of migrants. Identity, and associated understandings and conceptualisations of 'belonging', are thus also likely to differ.

A growing body of scholarship discusses concepts of 'belonging' in the context of refugee resettlement (e.g. [21,23,39,66]). This research has identified different types of 'belonging'. For Fozdar and Hartley [21], 'civic belonging' is based on an understanding of the equality of right and access to state services and benefits, while 'ethno belonging' constitutes a more esoteric sense of 'fitting in'. Research has shown that although refugees often express appreciation for the rights and privileges afforded them by virtue of their civic belonging, they feel disconnected from host societies on a deeper level; for such refugees, ethno belonging remains an aspiration [21,39,66]. Jay Marlowe, in his study of the experiences of refugees after the Canterbury earthquakes, identified a further category of 'ethnic belonging', which refers to the connections refugees feel to others within their ethnic community [39]. Marlowe's interviews demonstrated that, although patterns of identification and references to belonging shifted in the pre-, during and post-earthquake phases, ethnic belonging ultimately proved the type of belonging most refugees drew on for strength and support [39]. The ability to identify with one's ethnic group is particularly crucial for refugee youth for whom belonging is challenged in other aspects of their lives, such as in school [13].

Yet despite the existing research into both ethnic youth identity and concepts of 'belonging', on the one hand, and youth volunteering, on the other, the parallels between the two topics remain unexplored. Further, there has been little analysis of 'belonging' following disaster [39]. These gaps are surprising given the powerful hypotheses that can be drawn when considering the fact that both volunteering and ethnic identity knowledge can foster self-confidence, wellbeing and belonging among young people, traits which are arguably especially important following the disruption engendered by disaster.

3. Context

3.1. The Canterbury earthquakes

On 4 September 2010, a 7.1-magnitude earthquake hit Canterbury. Buildings and infrastructure sustained considerable damage but no loss of life occurred. The earthquake triggered unprecedented seismic activity across the region, with more than 15,000 aftershocks over the following eighteen months.[1] The most serious aftershock occurred on 22 February 2011, resulting in 185 deaths, thousands of injuries and extensive damage. The protracted nature of the disaster not only physically destroyed the city, but has also had deep emotional repercussions for many residents, including trauma, frustration and anger.

Statistics demonstrate that one response to the destruction and fear was flight. The population of Canterbury decreased immediately after the earthquakes, especially February 2011, although this figure has again increased as the region recovers [24]. This (temporary) out-migration included many refugee background people, with local media portraying their flight to Auckland and other places as a response to trauma endured earlier in life [20,47]. While it is possible that refugees are more vulnerable to disaster by virtue of their past and present circumstances, the Canterbury case actually provides evidence that the earthquakes

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[1] Of these thousands of aftershocks, 4558 aftershocks measuring above magnitude 3 were recorded between 4 September 2010 and 3 September 2014. Aftershocks, GeoNet, available at < http://info.geonet.org.nz/display/home/Canterbury+Aftershocks > retrieved 25 November 2014.